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A Tale of Two Societies: The Doing of Qualitative Comparative research in Hong Kong and Britain

Journal:	<i>Methodological Innovations</i>
Manuscript ID	MIO-16-0035
Manuscript Type:	Standard Article
Keywords:	qualitative methods, comparative qualitative research, cross national collaboration, vignette, translation
Abstract:	<p>Abstract</p> <p>This article explores the challenges and opportunities for methodological innovation arising from an exploratory, cross-national, qualitative study of women's lives in Hong Kong and Britain. We begin by briefly outlining the aims of our study and its original research design, based on life history interviews with young adult women and their mothers in each location. We then turn to a discussion of how this was modified as we recruited participants and conducted the interviews, including the use of vignettes. We aim to be transparent about some of the problems of implementing a symmetrical approach to generating qualitative data in very different socio-cultural settings compounded by the practical difficulties of geographical distance between team members. We argue for a flexible approach that takes account of local cultural sensibilities rather than trying to follow rigidly identical procedures, recognising also that, in any qualitative research team, there will be differences in approach that affect the data produced. We highlight some of the insights yielded by the problems we encountered and, in particular, an accidental innovation that occurred through an ad hoc decision to conduct focus groups with the young women, which we call 'cross-cultural data feedback'. This innovation involved our participants in contributing to cross-cultural comparison and also brought taken-for-granted assumptions in each setting into sharp relief, as well as sensitising us to issues that proved important to analysing our data. This leads us to raise issues of interpreting and analysing data from differing socio-cultural locations and translating between cultures. We conclude with some recommendations including the potential for future development of our method of cross-cultural data feedback.</p>

Introduction

This paper reports on some of the challenges and benefits of international collaboration in conducting comparative qualitative research, drawing on our experience of working together on a small exploratory study of two generations of women in Britain and Hong Kong. Cross-national collaborative research is now common in Europe, a product of European funding, but it is far rarer to find qualitative, cross cultural studies of societies that are geographically and culturally more distant from each other. Moreover, texts dealing with cross-cultural qualitative fieldwork are generally based on the premise of a researcher from one culture (usually from rich countries or the global north) working in ‘other’ cultures (Liamputtong 2010; Cleary 2013) and therefore focus on issues of cultural knowledge and sensitivity. Where collaboration is mentioned it is generally in terms of outsiders working with local communities or local researchers (Cleary 2013). Our study was not of this kind. We worked as an equal partnership between two principal investigators, one Hong Kong Chinese (H)¹ and the other white British (J) and with the intention of comparing the lives of Hong Kong Chinese and white British women, the majority ethnicities in the two locations.²

As Ryan-Flood and Gill (2010) note, research ‘inevitably presents dilemmas, challenges and choices, which are not always explicated in writing up’ (2010: 2), when the messiness and unpredictability of the process is often glossed over. Yet this very unpredictability can also, as we will show, create opportunities for methodological innovation as well as unanticipated insights into the lives of those we research. In this paper we seek to make transparent some of the

¹ In terms of the points we wish to raise it is necessary to identify each of us as individuals; to maintain anonymity during the review process we are using initials, which will be replaced by names if the paper is accepted for publication.
² We are not concerned with discussing our locations as ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ in the two settings. This issue has been much discussed in the literature, including the important point that these are not stable or mutually exclusive, (Letherby 2003; Liamputtong 2010).

problems and opportunities arising from working together as cross-national collaborators, following the reflexive practice now characteristic of feminist research (Letherby 2003; Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010). After briefly introducing the aims of our project we will discuss the methods we used, focusing the ways in which the differing socio-economic and cultural contexts in which we worked affected recruitment of participants and the conduct of in depth interviews and focus groups. We highlight a methodological innovation we developed by chance and deployed in the focus groups, ‘cross cultural data feedback’. This method, we argue, has the virtue of bringing cultural similarities and differences into sharp relief and in enabling participants themselves to be actively engaged in making cross-cultural comparisons. It also has the potential to be further developed in new research contexts. We also address some of the issues involved in analysing our data, making sense of it in the light of linguistic and cultural differences and in relation to conditions of life in the two locations.

In the beginning: conceptualising and planning our collaboration

Our study was framed as an exploration of the impact of social change on women’s personal lives and relationships, funded by an ESRC Hong Kong bilateral award.³ The impetus for this study was, in part, a product of the rare opportunity afforded by this bilateral scheme to apply for funding for cross-national research. But we were not only opportunistic; we had a genuine intellectual interest in refocusing academic debates beyond the parochially western. While small in scale we set out to address major sociological issues; in particular we sought to challenge the Eurocentrism of debates on intimacy and modernity.

³ Award number RES-000-22-362. The ESRC Hong Kong Bilateral programme is jointly sponsored by the ESRC and the Hong Kong Research Grants Council.

Mainstream sociological propositions on the transformation of intimacy (Giddens 1992) and the process of individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) have come under extensive criticism in terms of their assumptions about gender, sexuality and family relationships and the evidence base for their propositions (e.g. Jamieson 1999; Smart 2007; Heaphy 2007). These critiques, however, have largely remained focused on Western contexts; Jamieson’s (2011) conceptualization of practices of intimacy is a notable – and welcome – exception. More generally, the theorization of modernity has been marked by its western bias, and attempts to remedy this have been found wanting (see Bhambra 2007; 2014). Even those Asian scholars who have challenged universalizing characterizations of modernity, such as Yan (2007) and Chang (2010) have tended to take as given much of the western sociological narrative of the origins of modernity (author reference to be added). While seeking to unsettle Eurocentrism, our project was, paradoxically, developed as a response to debates that are Eurocentric in origin. This is perhaps inevitable if the aim is to bring the terms of these debates into question.

Hong Kong and the UK may seem strange sites for comparison as one is a nation and the other is a Special Administrative Region of China,⁴ and neither can be considered representative of their geographical region (Europe or East Asia). Although this particular comparative case may be very specific, the historical relationship between the UK and Hong Kong, as coloniser and colonised, makes it of particular interest. Both are now part of the rich, post-industrial global North but British colonialism has left its mark. The particular niche Hong Kong occupied in the British Empire was associated with a neglect of the local population.⁵ Up to the 1970s Hong Kong was characterized by ‘third world’ levels of poverty and, while it is now richer than the

⁴ While here we use ‘UK’ in discussing the relationship between the two territories, elsewhere we deliberately use ‘Britain’ and ‘British’ since all the UK interviews were conducted in England and Wales rather than in the UK as a whole.

⁵ For more information on the colonial history and its legacy see Carroll (dates), Tsang 2004, Chiu and Lui 2009.

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3 UK in terms of GDP per capita, the policies of both the colonial and current administrations have
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5 resulted in a lack of welfare provision and a huge gulf between rich and poor (Goodstadt 2013),
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7 forcing its inhabitants into self-reliance in a climate of economic uncertainty. This has had
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9 consequences for gendered divisions of labour and practices of intimacy (see e.g. Lee 2003). We
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11 set out to compare women's lives in these two contexts as offering us an opportunity to think
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13 about the gendered consequences of social change in terms of the intersections between local and
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15 global inequalities.
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20 While addressing major sociological issues, the funding available meant that our study would
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22 have to be modest in its scope.⁶ We planned at the outset to interview 12 pairs of young adult
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24 women and their mothers in each of the two locations (48 individuals), using the two generations
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26 of women as a proxy for change over time, and subsequently conducted focus groups with some
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28 of the young women. From the beginning we recognised the importance of a symmetrical
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30 approach in order to avoid taking one location as the baseline against which the other was
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32 assessed – in particular treating Britain as the norm and Hong Kong as 'other'. We therefore
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34 planned to pose the same research questions and use the same research instruments in both
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36 contexts while being sensitive to the particularities of local social conditions and cultural
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38 practices. In order to maximise the comparability of our samples we defined the characteristics
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40 of our desired participants to ensure as good a match as possible between the British and Hong
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42 Kong women to be interviewed. We sought young women who were adult but below the average
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44 age of marriage in both locations and set the age limits as between aged 20 and 26. Since we
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46 were interested in exploring issues raised by debates around transformations of intimacy and
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48 individualization, we decided to recruit young women with university level education, those who
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57 ⁶ The British end of the funding was equivalent to an ESRC small grant while the Hong Kong funding was
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would have a greater degree of choice in their styles of life than the less educationally privileged. We assumed that their mothers would have more diverse backgrounds. Finally, because of the complexity of comparing two locations and two generations we agreed that each sample should be culturally homogenous, recruiting from the majority ethnic group in each place: Chinese and Cantonese speaking Hong Kong women and white British women.

The interview guide we prepared at the outset was developed by the two PIs in face to face meetings. It followed a life history format in order to lead participants through the stages of their lives from childhood into adulthood and, for the older women, marriage and parenthood, with a focus on interpersonal relationships. We planned to phrase questions to elicit narrative responses, encouraging women to tell us about their lives and experiences but we also built in a series of prompts to ensure we covered similar ground if information we wanted did not emerge spontaneously, for example asking about who lived with them at a given time or about relationships with particular others. Towards the end of the interviews we added a few more direct questions to explore women’s understanding of the social changes they had lived through and also deployed vignettes to explore issues that might be difficult to address by other means. The guide was designed, as is usual in qualitative research, to be flexible enabling us to adapt to women’s specific circumstances and to vary questions in response to issues they raised, some which we expected to be culturally specific.

In designing both the guide and specific prompts we were, of course, aware that the flexibility of qualitative interviewing means that no two interviews follow exactly the same path, that interviews are interactional events and what goes on within them depends on a variety of situational elements. This potential variability is increased in collaborative research where more than one person is interviewing since each researcher’s conversational style is likely to affect

their interaction with participants. Additional issues arise in a study such as ours, where different members of the team were conducting interviews thousands of miles apart in different languages and different socio-cultural settings, additional issues arise. There is a delicate balance to be achieved in trying to ensure comparability of data while being sensitive to issues of eliciting it where differing cultural sensibilities are at stake. The cost and practicality of travelling between Hong Kong and the UK, and therefore the limited opportunities we had for face to face meetings, exacerbated the challenges that geographical distance posed. Once fieldwork began we were effectively working in parallel in recruiting and interviewing participants. While we kept in contact and discussed progress through electronic media as we went along, each team lacked detailed knowledge of the ways in which local conditions were affecting the research practices of the other. These factors did not become apparent to us until the full team met face to face six months into the fieldwork and about halfway through the interviewing, which was also when the first focus group was held.⁷

Parallel fieldwork, divergent practices: recruitment and the conduct of interviewing⁸

Since we were recruiting a purposive sample with specific age and educational requirements, and needed both the daughters and mothers to agree to take part, finding participants was not

⁷ The British team consisted of the PI (J) and a postdoctoral researcher (N) who was employed on the project half time for 17 months – the maximum affordable within the funding taking account of other expenses. As well as conducting most of the British interviews and co-facilitating both the Hong Kong and British focus groups, N was involved with the early stages of analysis and is co-author of this and two other papers. The Hong Kong team at any one time comprised the PI (H) and a research assistant. The Hong Kong funding was not sufficient to hire a postdoctoral researcher. Instead a series of short-term Research Assistants, with undergraduate or masters level education, were employed and were mostly involved in support tasks. Only one of these research assistants (who joined the team towards the end of the interviewing) was competent to help with interviews.

⁸ We have discussed the issues raised in this section and the next in greater detail elsewhere (authors 2015).

straightforward. We were eventually able to interview fourteen young Hong Kong women and twelve of their mothers and thirteen young British women and twelve of their mothers (51 individuals in total). The additional young women were those whose mothers had originally agreed to be interviewed but who subsequently dropped out, meaning that we had to seek additional participants to meet our target of twelve mother-daughter pairs in each location. We employed two recruitment strategies, advertising for participants with the appropriate characteristics and seeking them through our personal networks. The way this was accomplished differed in the two locations and impacted on the process of interviewing and, consequently, the data generated.

In Britain most participants were recruited through advertising in two university towns, one in Northern England and one in the South. Personal networks – referrals from colleagues – resulted in the recruitment of four of the pairs. We had expected that most of the first contacts would be with the young women who would then approach their mothers; in the event as many mothers as daughters were our first point of contact. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, all participants were recruited through personal networks. There were good cultural reasons for this in East Asian societies where recruiting through personal networks works far better than any other method. It fits ‘somewhat more naturally with Confucian mores and expectations than attempting to recruit unknown individuals who lie outside networks’ (Park and Lunt 2015 np). It is thus difficult to induce people to participate in qualitative research and to build rapport unless they are introduced through a known and trusted intermediary; in Chinese societies this is related to the importance of personal connections, *guanxi* (see, e.g. Liu 2007). A few of the families were already known to H. Other potential participants were recruited through introductions to young women from graduate students and staff in Hong Kong Universities. Once the young women

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3 agreed to be interviewed, they approached their mothers who then met with H in a social context
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5 in order to gain the degree of trust necessary for the interview to proceed.
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9 In the British case, even where personal contacts had been used, the interviewer was unknown to
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11 the participants. The personal contacts were made through J's networks, while most of the
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13 interviews were conducted by N. The British women, once recruited, were quite happy to spend
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15 a few hours discussing their lives with a total stranger, which is not unusual in interviewing in
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17 Western contexts. H, on the other hand, had to devote considerable time to building relationships
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19 with the older women, spent extended periods interviewing them and often became involved in
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21 their lives. The British interviews, however, were generally concluded within two hours and did
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23 not lead to ongoing relationships with participants. Because of these differences N was able to
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25 keep more closely to the agreed 'script' of the interview guide than was possible for H.
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29 The original intention had been to interview mothers and daughters separately. This was entirely
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31 feasible in Britain as most daughters had separate residences from their mothers; in the few cases
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33 where they lived together, there was sufficient privacy to conduct separate interviews in
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35 participants' homes. In Hong Kong this was rarely possible. In the first place the young Hong
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37 Kong women all lived with their mothers. They could easily be interviewed separately away
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39 from their homes, but once mothers were introduced it would have been culturally very difficult,
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41 and indeed impolite, to separate them from their daughters in order to interview them and would
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43 probably have made them uncomfortable. Moreover, Hong Kong apartments are very small,
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45 affording little privacy for separate interviews within domestic space. This was only possible in a
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47 few cases when a research assistant was able to work with H conducting parallel interviews and
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49 where it became, in the context, socially appropriate and practically feasible to negotiate separate
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51 interviewing. The lack of individual interviews does, of course raise questions about issues the
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older women may have been unwilling to discuss in their daughters’ presence and therefore about the comparability of some of our data. Moreover, since these were conversational interviews taking place within domestic space, if daughters were present they became actively involved in their mothers’ interviews. There were, however, benefits to this situation, since interactions between mothers and daughters were often revealing. For example, H was able to record an altercation between Gabby and her mother, Ms Au,⁹ about the reasons for the latter’s failure to offer her any information about sex. Ms Au said that she did not find it necessary to discuss sex and contraception with her daughters as she assumed that they would have learn it at schools and through the Internet, but Gabby disagreed:

Gabby: Schools would only teach you about menstruation but nothing deeper for example, premarital sex, I’d want to know more and ask you (mother) about that.

Ms Au: You can always go look up the Internet!

Gabby: Going on Internet is not the same as hearing your thoughts and opinion!

Ms Au: How come such a highly educated person like you would not even go look up these things on the Internet? You should know better!

Such interchanges are very revealing of the dynamics of mother-daughter interaction on potentially difficult issues, but we do not have data of this kind from the British women. A solution to lack of comparability of data that these different interviewing strategies produced

⁹ All names of participants are pseudonyms. In choosing pseudonyms we followed the form of names used in the interviews. Some of the Hong Kong mothers did not divulge their personal names (though all the British women did) and where this was the case we have used family names. In some previous publications we have used the title ‘Mrs’ but this is not culturally appropriate, hence the usage of ‘Ms’ here. Chinese women do not change their family name on marriage though they might be referred to as the ‘wife of’ someone, e.g. Wong *tai* or Wong *tai tai*. We have given the young Chinese women, and the older women who did use personal names, English pseudonyms as it is common practice for Hong Kong women, especially younger women to have both English and Chinese names and to use the former in everyday interaction – all the young women in our sample did.

might have been to interview British mothers and daughters together, but this was not feasible. Not only were we unaware of this difference in our interviewing practices until we were halfway through the process, but it there would have been practical difficulties in conducting joint interviews in Britain. The British mothers and daughters often lived considerable distances apart, so that N was travelling all over England and Wales to conduct interviews. It would therefore have been difficult and expensive to arrange joint interviews, even had we realised what was happening soon enough to change our original plans.

In retrospect we can see that what was happening was that each set of interviews was proceeding on the basis of local, taken-for-granted practices. As far as each of us was concerned we were following the agreed interview guide and gathering the data we needed – and we did, despite our differences, produce meaningful data, albeit under different conditions. While we were unaware, for a time, of the extent of the divergence in our approaches to interviewing we did anticipate from the outset differences in data generation arising from idiosyncrasies in personal interviewing styles and the specificities of local social and cultural contexts. The vignettes we introduced at the end of the interviews were designed, in part, to introduce a degree of standardisation. Even standardised research methods, however, may not work in the same way in two places and this may tell us something about adapting interviewing techniques to differing cultural settings.¹⁰

Using vignettes

¹⁰ We also tried using ‘personal community maps’ (Spencer and Pahl 2006) as a way of capturing both the possible diversity of family forms and personal relationships within our samples and also differences between Hong Kong and British patterns of relatedness – for example the greater importance accorded to extended family relationships in Hong Kong (see e.g. Koo and Wong 2009). While this technique worked well with British participants, it proved impossible to use in Hong Kong and was quickly abandoned (see authors 2016).

Vignettes, fictional scenarios that usually feature a problem or dilemma facing an imaginary protagonist, have been used in social research since the 1980s. They are designed to elicit responses on what someone would or should do in the situation depicted. Instead of asking about attitudes or beliefs in the abstract, vignettes supply contextual information in the recognition that ‘meanings are social and morality may be situationally specific’ (Finch 1987: 106). They are also useful in asking about sensitive issues, enabling participants to talk about an imaginary person and situation rather than their own lives. This was one reason that we decided to use them to explore issues of unplanned pregnancy and lesbianism, which could be difficult issues for Hong Kong women to discuss more directly. We also, however, wanted to avoid glib liberal responses to these issues, which we thought might come from some British women. We kept our vignettes simple, confined to a single set of circumstances combined with an open question. Our vignettes ran as follows:

The unplanned pregnancy vignette: ‘Kate is a single woman in her early 20s. She has a boyfriend and is embarking on a promising career. Kate finds that she is pregnant.’

What are her options and what would you advise her to do?

The coming out vignette: ‘Claire is a 22 year old lesbian who has never come out to her mother. She decides the time is right to do so because she has fallen in love and wants to introduce her girlfriend to her mother.’

How do you think her mother would feel about this?

We had anticipated that Hong Kong and British women would have different opinions on these issues, which was the case. We have discussed this elsewhere (author references to be inserted). What was less expected was a marked difference in *how* each group of women responded. We

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3 hoped, and expected, that the open-ended framing of the questions accompanying our vignettes
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5 would prompt considerable discussion of the issues they raised. The Hong Kong women,
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7 however, gave very brief, cut and dried responses. For example, commenting on the ‘unplanned
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9 pregnancy’ vignette Ms Lee said that if her daughter were pregnant she would encourage
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11 marriage: ‘if she loves the baby’s father there’s no point in getting an abortion.’ The lesbian
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13 vignette prompted similarly minimal and often condemnatory statements. Elsie, for example,
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15 said, ‘I would want her to have a normal married life rather than an abnormal relationship’. The
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17 only Hong Kong woman who gave a fuller account was a mother who had faced just that
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19 situation and told of the struggle she had to accept it. The British women, on the other hand,
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21 engaged in extended discussions of each scenario in which they weighed up possible alternatives
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23 and elaborated on their own views of issues at stake. Here, for example, are extracts from
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25 Susan’s very lengthy and considered reflections on the unplanned pregnancy vignette:
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32 Well, her options are to have the baby, to have an abortion, um, to um, if you’re having
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34 the baby you’d have to consider what childcare arrangements you were going to be
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36 making, is the partner committed to a long term relationship with Kate and the baby,
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38 those are all factors that have to be taken into account. What sort of rights she has within
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40 her career if any, if she’s already got maternity rights [...] she’d have to talk with her
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42 partner and try and establish what his commitment to the baby was, then think about what
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44 she really wanted herself because it’s a decision that will affect the rest of her life no
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46 matter which way she takes it. [...] I think you just have to say well, other people that
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48 love you will support you whatever decision you make, but only you can make that
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50 decision. (Susan, British mother)
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Generally the British responses would be seen as producing ‘richer’ data and the brevity of the Hong Kong responses would be seen as disappointing. These differences, however, might be telling us something. We do not think that vignettes are inappropriate to Asian contexts as others have used them successfully on a range of issues (e.g. Liu 2007; Kojima 2013). It could be that this reticence on issues concerning sexuality is particular to Hong Kong women but this is unlikely as they did discuss some related moral issues both in interviews and the focus group we conducted with the young women (author reference). The difference could also be simply a chance effect of different interviewing styles.¹¹ The most plausible explanation is what we have elsewhere identified as the pragmatism of Hong Kong women, arising from the material conditions of their lives (author reference). In the case of the unplanned pregnancy, the issue was cut and dried to them because the options are limited and these limitations are related to the wider social context. The British women, however, were able to engage in lengthy considered weighing up of possibilities because there *are* more choices realistically open to young British women in Britain than in Hong Kong. In the case of an unplanned pregnancy, for example, British women have better employment rights, there is a greater acceptance of single motherhood and cohabitation and more social support for single mothers. In Hong Kong the only realistic choices are to marry or have an abortion. For the Hong Kong women we interviewed there was simply nothing else to be said. Responses to the coming out scenario may also reflect pragmatic attitudes since life for lesbians and gay men is much tougher in Hong Kong than the UK (Kong 2011; Tang 2013) and those lives remain largely hidden from the majority of the population. Thus, not only would Hong Kong women, particularly the mothers, see departure from the heterosexual norm as extremely difficult to deal with and threatening to the material well-being

¹¹ For more detail on the use of vignettes in Asian contexts see authors 2015)

of families, but they had few experience of known LGBT people to draw on in responding to the scenario with which they were presented.

The situation for the British sample was different. Many referred to known lesbian and gay relatives, friends and acquaintances. Even the one British mother with very negative attitudes to lesbianism and homosexuality, Patricia, was able to draw on personal experiences of a gay cousin and a friend with a lesbian daughter to modify her initial response. Whereas she began by saying that the mother would be ‘utterly devastated’ by finding that her daughter was a lesbian, she moved on to imagining her coming to terms with it. Whereas Patricia could refer to knowledge of her own social circle in making sense of the vignette, despite her conservative attitudes, most of the Hong Kong mothers had no such knowledge or experience,

Responses to the ‘coming out’ vignette differed in another respect. Whereas the Hong Kong women focused only on the issue of coping with a lesbian daughter, many of the British women of both generations noticed a particular (and deliberate) feature of the vignette – the relatively late age of coming out and tended to see this as problematic, indicating a strained relationships, a prejudiced mother. Some also suggested the mother would be hurt by the daughter’s past failure to confide in her. For example Lucy, one of the young British women, opened her response to the vignette by saying ‘If I was her mother, I’d be really upset that my daughter hadn’t felt she could come to me with something that affects her life so much.’ Even when the British women did not mention the age at coming out spontaneously, the ways in which they discussed then enabled the interviewer to follow up with simple questions such as ‘how about her age?’ This prompted further thoughts on why the daughter had not come out to her mother earlier. The responses given by the Hong Kong women, on the other hand, worked to close off further discussion, making it difficult for H to probe further without disrupting the rapport she had devoted so much

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time to fostering. This shutting down of the topic may reflect the concern about ‘face’ (*mianzi*) and family reputation, which are still of paramount importance in Hong Kong. Closing off options (in relation to both vignettes) is a way of showing disapproval or possibly fear of confronting the possibility of ever having to deal with such a situation. The differing ways women dealt with the vignettes, we are suggested, may reveal something about the social context of their lives.

Cross-Cultural Data Feedback: the focus group experience.

The interviews were initially expected to be our only means of generating data and it was only when we were halfway through the interviews that we decided to conduct two focus groups with the young women, one in each location. The first of these took place during a six day research team meeting in Hong Kong. I had organised this in advance of the J and N’s arrival, thinking that it would be useful for the British researchers to have a first-hand ‘feel’ for the lives of Hong Kong women. Unlike the Hong Kong interviews, which were conducted in Cantonese, the focus group discussion took place in English – in which all the young women, typically for those who are University educated, were fluent. All three of us were present. Participants included the young Hong Kong women who had already been interviewed and a few we planned to interview later. Many of them brought friends along, which resulted in a rather larger group than had been anticipated.

As this proved very productive, and in keeping with our commitment to operationalising symmetrical methods in the two locations, we subsequently conducted a similar focus-group in Britain. Like the Hong Kong focus group, the British one involved some of the daughters from

the sample and a few other young women of similar ages and backgrounds – but for different reasons. In Britain this occurred because of the impracticability of bringing together a geographically dispersed group, and we therefore invited the young women local to us and recruited additional members.

In the focus groups we experimented with a new technique, which proved to be very fruitful: discussing some of our emergent findings, illustrated with data, from the other location, enabling Hong Kong women to comment on British women's accounts and vice-versa. We are calling this, for want of a better term 'cross-cultural data feedback'. This came about almost by chance. J and N had brought transcripts of the British interviews with them to Hong Kong and we all thought it would be interesting to have the young Hong Kong women comment on some of the accounts of their British contemporaries. Having done this successfully in Hong Kong, we then made data from the Hong Kong focus group available to the British one. The effect of this process was to involve our participants in the process of making cross-cultural comparisons. Not only did it provoke lively discussion and interesting insights into perceptions of cultural differences and similarities, but it also brought into the open everyday assumptions about 'the way things are' in each setting that would otherwise not have been made explicit and issues that might not otherwise have emerged (author reference).¹² It also alerted us to subjects we might explore more fully in the interviews we had yet to conduct. Two of the issues thus brought into sharp relief were modes of disciplining children and the regulation and monitoring of young women's sexual conduct.

¹² A film called "Mom Matters" has been made of the Hong Kong focus group, with subtitles in Chinese (author ref.)

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3 A strong theme that had emerged in the Hong Kong interview data was the use of severe and
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5 systematic physical punishment to discipline children. This was not an issue that had featured
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7 much in our British interviews. When it was mentioned at all, by either mothers or daughters, it
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9 was to refer to the slapping of children as a very occasional, exceptional and regrettable
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11 occurrence. In the Hong Kong focus group the issue of punishment was raised again. The
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13 consensus among the young Hong Kong women was that subjecting children to beatings was
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15 widespread and acceptable provided the punishment was just and delivered in the context of
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17 love. Angela, for example, told us that she was regularly beaten with a feather duster, with her
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19 mother counting down ‘ten, nine..’ etc., but saying all the time ‘I love you’.¹³ Angela felt that
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21 this was excessive – she would beat her own child ‘but five times would be enough’. Donna also
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23 saw this as a necessary part of childrearing:
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30 ‘Although what I learnt at school [from her psychology degree] teaches me that we
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32 should not physically punish the child, I still think that it is necessary as the child needs
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34 to be afraid of the parents to a certain extent. You can’t spoil them too much! (Donna)
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38 When we shared this with the British group only one participant mentioned physical punishment
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40 and all agreed that control through guilt was a more common and effective parental strategy:
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43 Carla: ... but like the disappointment thing, that, ‘I’m very disappointed in you’, that was
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45 used a lot ... just anyone telling you they’re disappointed is horrible
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49 All: yeah
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57 ¹³ Angela was, of course, translating her mother’s words into English in telling her story. We recognise that the
58 words she chose might not ring true for a Cantonese speaker. See below.
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Emily: a positive thing as well, like my parents as well as doing the whole disappointment thing and stuff they just sort of show you examples of good behaviour as well like, oh look at such, so she's really well behaved, so you'd know what was expected, what you emulate as well as what you shouldn't do, you'd have examples or like stories in which, you know, the kid was really well behaved and got reward or something like that, you kind of got it engraved in you that way as well, it's good to behave in this way, and if you behave in this way then we'd be very disappointed

J: so that disappointed really gets to you

Carla: mm, yeah it's horrible

Alexis: still does now, if someone, if my dad says I'm really disappointed, even now you feel really guilty, kind of let you down

Further exploration of this issue in both sets of interviews confirmed that this was a marked difference between our two samples. This should not, however, be taken to mean that guilt and shame were unimportant in the disciplining of Hong Kong children – rather that they worked in conjunction with corporal punishment, which could itself be experienced as shaming.

Another major difference, on which we have reported elsewhere (author references) was in mothers' management of their daughters' sexual activity. The British mothers, with one exception, accepted that their unmarried daughters were sexually active and had been since their teens. The Hong Kong mothers, on the other hand, assiduously policed their daughters' conduct and constantly admonished them against pre-marital virginity loss. This issue provoked lengthy and lively discussions in the Hong Kong focus group, which were then used as stimulus material for the young British women – who were surprised and indeed shocked that mothers could be so

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intrusive and that daughters could accept such restrictions. What became evident here, which was nowhere made explicit in the interviews, was how taken for granted it is that young British women, from their teens onwards, will be heterosexually active. It is not that the British mothers and daughters did not mention parental regulation of sexuality – they did – but it was largely in terms of mothers talking about keeping their daughters safe (from unwanted pregnancy and coercive sex). This was is keeping with of the expectation that young women would and did engage in a variety of sexual practices

One aspect of this expectation was that it was common, in the British families, for young women to have boyfriends staying over, and sharing their beds, in the parental home. We were aware that this would be unusual in the Hong Kong context and therefore asked the participants in the Hong Kong focus group to comment on this. We used a data extract from an interview with one of the British participants, Zoe, who complained about an age restriction on her being able to sleep with her boyfriend in the family home, which she had not been allowed to do until she turned eighteen – although her mother had gone with her when she was ‘went on the pill’ a year earlier. The reaction among the Hong Kong women was, universally, that there was no way this would be possible for them even currently, when they are in their twenties (author references). Using cross-cultural data feedback here also provided an opportunity for cultural misunderstanding. Towards the end of the discussion the following sequence occurred:

Jacqueline: but what kind of, I mean the background of family, how is it like, this family?

J: um, it’s sort of lower middle class, mother’s a teacher um, parents were um, quite hippy-ish in their youth, so her mother’s a bit sort of alternative, if you like, she’s still a bit of an aging hippy I guess, in some ways

Jacqueline: and then the house, they have space for them to sleep together?

J had interpreted this question as referring to the attitudes and lifestyle of the family, whereas what Jacqueline was asking was whether they very wealthy to have so much space at their disposal. In Hong Kong, because of the excessively high cost of housing, most people live in very small apartments with limited opportunities for privacy – something we went on to discuss. This interchange, while producing a passing sense of embarrassment at her own cultural insensitivity on J's part (since she was well aware of the housing situation in Hong Kong) also alerted us to something that was to become central to our analysis – the importance of material factors in shaping personal lives and relationships (author references).

Analytical strategies – mapping and discovering differences and similarities

We do not have the space here to discuss in detail our analytic strategies, but wish to highlight a few key points we consider important in comparative analysis. As is generally the case in qualitative work, analysis is a complex iterative process. We began developing a rough coding frame while we were still interviewing, based both on our research questions and themes emergent from the data – many of which we had not expected. This enabled us to begin to map generational and cross cultural similarities and differences. Both the coding frame and this mapping underwent continual modification and refinement with deeper exploration of the data. At all stages of this process consultation between us was vital in order to ensure that we each understood the other's perspective and were able to provide necessary context essential in making sense of the data from the differing locations.¹⁴ In interpreting the data we consistently

¹⁴ By this stage there were just two of us working on the data, J and H, the two PIs.

paid attention to the wider socio-economic, political and cultural contexts of the women’s lives. This is vital to avoid the dangers of cultural essentialism (Narayan1998) and especially of any orientalist assumptions about Chinese culture.

Here we found Lynn Jamieson’s (2011) concept of ‘practices of intimacy’ particularly useful and is has now become central to our ongoing analysis; it has sensitised us to both similarities and differences between Hong Kong and Britain and enabled us to link accounts of everyday practices in their social context. Jamieson developed this concept, in part, as a possible challenge to methodological nationalism, suggesting that it could be applied cross-culturally. Practices of intimacy’, as Jamieson points out, are not necessarily egalitarian. A good example of this is parental disciplining of children, where the concept of practices of intimacy enabled us to see our data on this issue in a new light. While it may seem odd to think of physical punishment as ‘intimacy’, the Hong Kong context alerted us to the possible legitimacy of doing so; in both societies parents ‘love and punish’ (author ref), albeit in different ways. These may be two sides of the same coin and therefore part of the practice of parent-child intimacy within families. This might broaden ideas of intimacy in terms of what goes in in families and how managing children’s behaviour relates to overall expectations of family practices and responsibilities.

The differences between British and Hong Kong child-rearing practices should not, we would argue, be analysed as simply cultural, but as also a product of the socio-economic conditions of mothers’ lives and their daughters’ anticipated futures. There are parallels between the differences we found in our Hong Kong and British samples and the class differences in mothers’ regulation of daughters’ behaviour identified by Walkerdine and Lucey (1989). The strictness of girls’ upbringing in Hong Kong should be seen in terms of their mothers preparing them to enter a highly competitive educational and working environment in a fiercely capitalist

economy with almost nothing by way of a welfare state. The mothers themselves had grown up in the colonial era when conditions were even worse and life was a struggle for survival; often their own education had been sacrificed so that they could contribute to the family economy (cf. Salaf 1995). They therefore imposed rigid boundaries on their daughters' conduct in order to ensure the latter's future success. The British mothers, having grown up with the establishment of the welfare state and benefitted from the expansion of educational opportunities, could afford a more 'relaxed' attitude to rearing their daughters (author ref).

We make these points here in order to underline how, in a variety of ways, the material socio-economic contexts of life have been woven into the analysis of our data, including taking account of the intertwined histories of Hong Kong and the UK and the lasting legacies of colonialism and how these histories have influenced practices of intimacy. This does not mean that cultural differences are irrelevant, merely that cultural traditions should not be understood in isolation as definitive of how a given population behaves. One significant aspect of culture that had major consequences for our research is language.

The issue of language further complicated the analytic process given that the interviews were conducted in the native language of participants and that, while H is fluent in English, J does not speak Cantonese or read Chinese. It is vitally important, however, that transcription and data analysis are conducted in the original language. Language matters, as there are often not direct translations of culturally specific terms so that translating our Chinese transcripts into English would have risked not only a loss of nuance but also possible distortion of meaning. Even those who are bilingual can find modes of expression delimited by the language they are speaking at any given time. In one of our examples of physical punishment, Angela's story involved her translating her mother's words as 'I love you'. These words served as a 'free translation' and

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make perfect sense to an Anglophone audience, but, as a Cantonese speaker would immediately recognise, are unlikely to be a literal translation. The word ‘love’ in Cantonese (and also in Putonghua/Mandarin) is ‘*ai*’, but is rarely used in a familial context among Hong Kong people as it is too strong a word. It is more likely that Angela’s mother used the common phrase ‘*ngo ho sek nei*’, which would translate as ‘I really care about you’ – this would have been a rather long-winded expression to use in English and her choice of translation was thus a practical one, capturing a degree of conceptual equivalence (Birbili 2000), but losing some of the cultural specificity.

Because we did not wish the subtleties of our participants’ words to be lost in translation, we did not work with translations of the Cantonese interviews. Instead the Hong Kong team provided the British team with summaries of the interviews. We then analysed the two data sets separately but to our common, and continually evolving, coding frame, constantly returning to the data and discussing it with each other as we developed our analysis. It is only when we wish to quote a participant that we then translate their words. When we do this, we find ourselves having to make a choice, like Angela, between a literal and freer translation, finding a compromise that conveys a degree of conceptual equivalence. Even where the literal meaning is directly translatable, a literal translation can be baffling to a speaker of another language. An example is provided by the way we dealt with a Hong Kong mother, Ellen, talking about her daughter’s intention to buy her parents an apartment and expressing belief in her daughter’s ability to do so. Having said this she commented, in literal translation ‘we should not look down on our children.’ While ‘look down on’ is an expression used in both Cantonese and English, to J this sounded odd applied to a person’s children. In the initial published version (author ref) we settled on

‘underestimate’ as a conceptual equivalent, capturing what Ellen meant but perhaps, in the process, losing some of the cultural specificity. We are still arguing about this!

In other circumstances the literal meaning actually helps in arriving at an appropriate translation. Chinese is grammatically very different from European languages and is written in characters, each one of which represents a concept (which can also of course be spoken). One way of proceeding, particularly with difficult to translate passages of transcript, is to think what each character denotes and connotes. We found it useful to work together with the Chinese transcripts, with H providing first a rough translation of the gist of the passage but then focusing down on the meaning of each character and discussing the translation between us – thus taking advantage of H’s native understanding of Cantonese and J’s more in depth understanding of how varying possible translations are likely to be understood by English speakers. These issues of translation continue to be discussed between us as we carry out further analysis on and writing from our data.

Conclusion

Interviews and focus groups can never provide a transparent window into people’s lives; they are products of interaction that has occurred at a particular time and place, and the resultant data are co-produced by researchers and participants within those spatial and temporal limits. The significance of this in relation to the project we have been discussing has become particularly clear to us because of events that occurred in Hong Kong after we had completed our empirical work. If we were doing this research now, after the Umbrella Movement occupations and its subsequent repercussion on Hong Kong residents, where political divisions and polarisation are

often manifested within families, especially between generations, we would doubtless have elicited different stories.¹⁵

This was exploratory research based on small samples, but we have learned great deal from it, not simply about women’s lives in different places but also how to do research of this kind. Research of any kind can never be ‘a straightforward, clinical, easily manageable process’ but ‘inevitably presents numerous challenges’ (Ryan Flood and Gill 2010: 2). Cross-national collaboration and is even more challenging than research conducted in a single location. It is clear, however, that the difficulties and challenges we encountered were not merely hurdles to be overcome, or differences in research practice to be ironed out, but actually tell us something about practices of intimacy in different socio-cultural contexts. In particular our experience indicates that while standardisation of research practices might be seen as essential to producing comparable data, it might also lead to a flattening out of meaning and context, and therefore the loss of important insights. In working collaboratively there must be room for researchers to modify their practices in response to local conditions and cultural sensitivities and also to experiment and innovate – above all to be flexible and not to insist on applying western research protocols to setting where they are inappropriate.

It was this flexibility and willingness to experiment which led to the development of a useful innovative method – cross-cultural data feedback. We have learnt from the experience of using this method in a rather ad hoc way, as a result of serendipity, and are now beginning to think about the ways in which the process could be improved to benefit our own and others’ future cross-cultural research. First, planning it into the research design at the outset would certainly

¹⁵ This has become evident from our new study, currently in the pilot phase, of the impact of the umbrella movement and its aftermath on practices of intimacy. We have recorded new strains in familial relationships, but also new forms of solidarity and personal relationships and emerging politicised identities among the younger generation.

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3 help to make it more systematic and effective, with the proviso that it would still be necessary to
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5 be open to adapting it along the way as unexpected issues and data emerged. Secondly, it is
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7 particularly helpful to videotape the focus group interaction in order to pick up non-verbal
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9 responses to the shared data and also, potentially, to play it back to groups from other locations.
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11 If different languages were in use the videos could be subtitled. This raises potential practical
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13 and ethical difficulties. The practical issues are ones of timing and asymmetry between groups.
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15 The first group conducted would not, of course, have another focus group to respond to, but
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17 could (as our Hong Kong group did) respond to previously collected interview data. It might then
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19 be possible to hold a second round of more symmetrical focus groups in which videos were
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21 exchanged between two (or among more) groups. The ethical concerns relate to ensuring consent
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23 to being videoed its use with other participants, as well as protecting anonymity. Out third
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25 recommendation is that it would be beneficial for research from differing locations to all be
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27 present at each focus group, both to feed into it and observe. These are ideas we are working
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29 with in developing future collaborations, but there may be other ways in which this fruitful
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31 method could be further developed and modified by us and other researchers.
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